



Performance Anxiety

It's Not Just For Men

BY CLAUDIA SIX

After more than 20 years in clinical practice, I have come to the conclusion that just about everyone is anxious about sex, at least at some point. I don't mean to be a downer. But being naked, wanting, and aroused—it doesn't get much more vulnerable than that. We all have some trepidation, especially around arousal. But there's an assumption that performance anxiety is about guys getting it up, keeping it up, cumming at the right time. When in fact women are just as anxious as men; it just looks different.

I use "anxiety" as an umbrella term for any kind of emotional discomfort, and "performance anxiety" as any emotional discomfort that interferes with enjoyment of sex.

When a woman is anxious about sex, a number of things can happen. Since in terms of arousal, women are like Crock-Pots and men are like microwaves, we ladies tend to fret about our partner losing interest, getting bored, or taking it personally if it takes us longer than them to get fully aroused. And since women can always be penetrated, ready or not, a lot of us tend to engage in intercourse before our body is fully ready, and thus chronic yeast infections can occur. If a woman repeatedly pulls her man on top of her to invite penetra-

tion, her partner has no reason to believe she isn't ready, and so the pattern perpetuates itself. In the long run she may become resentful, because since her arousal is lower to begin with, and because she may fear resulting yeast or bladder infections, she may not orgasm consistently, adding frustration to existing trepidation.

Another way that anxiety manifests in a woman is that she's in her head worrying about the size of her ass, whether she's sexy enough, whether the kids are going to wake up and walk in (lock the bedroom door, people—it's not a parental crime!), how long it's going to take because she's not in the mood, or whether her antidepressants are going to hinder her ability to orgasm. And when she's in her head, busy with all these thoughts, she's not in her body. Maybe her eyes are even closed. One of the basic truths about sex is that it's really hard to get turned on if you're not in your body.

Another scenario involves him getting anxious, because on some level he knows that she's anxious. This may not be conscious thought, but our bodies know. There's an instant feedback loop with anxiety, just as there is with high arousal: when one person is in the throes of it, the other picks up on it viscerally

and it impacts them. What happens next? He cums too soon, thus setting the stage for both partners to stay anxious—he about how long he'll last, she about her enjoyment if he orgasms sooner than she'd like. With men, anxiety speeds things up and they cum sooner than they'd like. With women, it slows things down.

Too often I see people who think they are broken or don't have chemistry with their partner, when all that is happening is that they are anxious. So if this is something that you struggle with on occasion, it's not terminal.

Don't blame your mate to cover your own feelings of incompetence. That's unkind, not truthful, and only pushes them away. Don't pout. And don't fake an orgasm to cover your sense of inadequacy about your insufficient arousal. That's dishonest too. It doesn't have to be that way.

You can change the thoughts in your head from negative ones to positive ones. Most of us have something in our lives that we have experience being good at. It may be a sport, sales, an artistic endeavor. Think about what you tell yourself when you are engaged in that activity. I bet the thoughts are positive and empowered. The good news is that you have a track record of positive beliefs impacting the outcome of something you do. You can apply positive notions to sex, and experience success, in just the same way.

And it's not a "performance." You're not entertaining an audience. You're sharing mutual pleasure. Stay in your own body and your own feelings and desires . . . and share deliciousness, whatever that looks like for you.

Get out of your head and get present. A good way to do that is to open your eyes (yes, ladies, you too) and connect with your lover's eyes—let him or her really see you. Scary? I know! But so rewarding, I promise. Also look at your bodies and what they are doing (oh my!). Seriously, that will help you get in the room.

Another way to decrease anxiety is to call yourself out. Just say: "Hey, baby, I'm a little anxious right now and having trouble getting present with you. Can you just hold me for a little while? I really want to be here for this. I know it's going to feel so good if I'm fully in my body." Saying what is real for you in the moment serves several purposes: it takes the charge out of it for you, it gives your lover a weather report on what's happening with you, and it's more authentic. You get to be known for who you really are, human insecurities and all. It's what I call Erotic Integrity. 🐦

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